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U.S. Reinstates Funds for Russian Chemical Demilitarization

ARMS CONTROL TODAY

Seth Brugger

On December 28, President George W. Bush signed a major defense spending bill that reinstates U.S. funding for the design and construction of a chemical weapons destruction facility in Shchuch'ye, Russia.

The bill's signing comes after Bush pledged to seek an “overall increase in funding” for the Shchuch'ye project during a December 11 speech in South Carolina. In a December 27 statement outlining the results of an administration threat reduction policy review, the president also said that he would seek to “accelerate” the program. (See [Threat Reduction Boosted By Policy Review, Spending Bills.](#))

As a party to the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention, Moscow must destroy its declared 40,000-metric-ton chemical weapons stockpile. The Shchuch'ye chemical weapons destruction facility is one of three that Russia plans to construct and therefore plays a central role in Russia's chemical demilitarization effort.

The Russian destruction program has been reliant on international support. However, for the past two fiscal years, the House of Representatives blocked new U.S. funding for Shchuch'ye, citing questions about Moscow's ability to finance parts of the project that it is responsible for and concerns over the amount of financial support put forth by other countries, among other matters.

A number of factors came together to help win renewed U.S. funding this year. More funding has been promised or received from other countries, and Moscow has recently increased its financing of chemical demilitarization. Domestically, the Bush administration's support for the project, efforts by Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN) to work with his House counterparts, and leadership by Representatives Curt Weldon (R-PA) and John Spratt (D-SC) facilitated fresh project funding, according to a congressional source.

Appropriations for the Shchuch'ye facility are contained in the fiscal year 2002 defense authorization act, which permits Washington to spend up to \$50 million on Russian chemical weapons destruction this fiscal year.

However, funding is conditioned upon Russia meeting six requirements. Moscow must provide a “full and accurate disclosure” of its chemical weapons stockpile, demonstrate an annual commitment to allocate at least \$25 million to chemical weapons destruction, develop a “practical plan” for destroying its nerve agent stockpile, enact a law calling for the elimination of all its nerve agents at one site, and agree to destroy two particular chemical weapons destruction facilities. In addition, the international community must show a “demonstrated commitment” to fund and build the infrastructure needed to support and operate the Shchuch'ye facility. U.S. government officials say that meeting the first requirement could be difficult.

However, this December the General Accounting Office reached an agreement in principle with its Russian counterpart to conduct a joint audit of the Russian chemical weapons stockpile. In an interview, Comptroller General David Walker said that the two sides have yet to work out the deal's details. Walker added that the audit is not specifically targeted at helping satisfy the funding conditions for Shchuch'ye but said, “It might be possible to structure the joint audit to help assure that one or more conditions have been met.”

Russian plans currently call for the Shchuch'ye facility to become operational by 2005. According to a Defense Department contractor, construction could begin as soon as the secretary of defense certifies that Russia has fulfilled the funding conditions. Certification is not likely before April, and the United States aims to finish construction in five years, missing the Russian target date for beginning operations, the contractor said.

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1100 H Street NW, #520
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